

In the Winter

By Timothy J. Lensmire

In the winter of waiting for tenure, my body fell apart. It has not been put back together. You can't see it — you'll know if you are close and I tell you what happened, is happening.

I thought I had the flu, which didn't keep me from going to my first Green Bay Packer game, with my best friend from high school, Paul, during the Christmas holiday. The next day the skin on my chest on the left side, over my heart, was sensitive to the touch. I thought I had the flu. The rest of my chest, then out through my arms and fingers, then down through my belly and groin and legs and feet — eventually all so sensitive that wearing clothes and shoes hurt. The worst was I couldn't sit with my son John, with my daughter Sarah, on my lap, couldn't roughhouse, wrestle.

Even after tenure came (I wished so hard that that's what was needed) my skin betrays me. Neurologists, dermatologists, allergists, endocrinologists, -ists, -ists, -ists — for a year and a half they told me they didn't know what was wrong (they still don't). At night I hurt, didn't sleep, took up repeating prayers I had learned as a child, over and over, to pass the time, since I no longer believed.

I gave up going to doctors. Things calmed down, the pain lessened. It flares up often enough. I get by.

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I was born in a small town in rural Wisconsin, one of the few remaining communities in Wisconsin that still practiced cannibalism. Luckily, I was born to parents who were more enlightened than the neighbors — Mother and Father taught me the barbarity of eating just anyone, and helped me develop healthy and moral habits in my relations with others.

Of course, I had to give up these pursuits when I went to Michigan State University for graduate school. I quickly learned that consuming other people was frowned upon, even as other social practices were widespread, such as backstabbing, using graduate students for cheap labor, and feigning collegiality until trouble arose and then embracing hierarchical arrangements. I found these new social activities disturbing and realized that I was quite naive and had led a relatively sheltered life as a youth.

Luckily, I had a small group of friends who supported me as I worked toward my Ph.D. in Education. One was John Dewey. Like me, John was born, he grew up, and went to graduate school. Also like me, John (or Big John, as he was affectionately known after that first time we all went swimming naked at the old Circle Drive pool after hours) became very concerned with the way that the Dean and the Chair of Teacher Education were running the College. In this book, *School and Society*, he devotes parts of two chapters to a trenchant critique of their repressive administrative practices, in thinly-disguised discussions of German and Polish kindergartens. In his final chapter, as you probably remember, John argues forcefully that the only appropriate action in such a situation is armed revolution.

Of course, much later, when John presided over the international trial of Trotsky, and took a position in opposition to the use of force for social change, Trotsky was quick to remind John of his early writing. At the trial, John was in poor form, claiming first that he had never written such a thing, and then, that if he had, it was either because he was working through a traumatic childhood experience, or because his pen had slipped while he was writing. Trotsky surprised all of us in attendance with a stinging reference to Freud and “kettle reasoning,” which left John muttering that he did NOT hate his father. It was sad.

It turns out that another member of our group, Mikhail (Mick) Bakhtin, was the one who had sent Trotsky Dewey’s book. Mick’s specialty was pancakes, but he talked and wrote most about language. In his experiences in the College, he found that the administration pursued what he called a “Humpty Dumpty” (in his later work, “centripetal”) language policy that sought to constrain the possible meanings of words to exactly and only what it wanted them to mean. Mick, of course, was a big fan of “Brer Rabbit” (“centrifugal”) language policies and practices, and consequently was kicked out of graduate school after flunking his comprehensive exam twice (examiners complained that they could understand nothing of what he wrote). A copy of his second exam was printed in the underground campus paper, *Lacunae*,

and, not surprisingly, graduate students, junior faculty members, and maintenance and custodial workers found his writing to be clear and concise. Mick's failed exam response was eventually published as the monograph, *Rabelais and his World*.

The final member of our quartet was Virginia Woolf (or Perky, as she was affectionately known after that first time we all went swimming naked at the old Circle Drive pool after hours). Virginia lived with me for a few months, but was restless and moved often, looking for an apartment of her own where she could be happy. Like Mick, Virginia was interested in language and despaired at the possibilities for saying and writing the truth in her courses — she thought that the teacher question “Where's that in the text?” was a stunningly effective means of class management. It was from Virginia that I learned to speak and write in clear, concise statements, statements that were only as long as they had to be, set up a skipping sort of rhythm that invited readers to listen to the music of the prose, and avoided complex grammatical structures that demanded that readers do any work figuring out where the hell the author — in this case, me — was going.

So, where was I. Oh yes, Virginia.

It is very hard for me, at this point, not to make a little joke, confusing Virginia the state in the United States with Virginia my old friend at Michigan State, for comic effect and just the suggestion of sex. Something like:

So where was I. Oh yes, Virginia.

Virginia is a warm, moist Southern state that I have regrettably never had the pleasure of exploring.

Very tempting. Virginia, Mick, and I would often play around with language like that, laughing at what we called the “ole slippery signifier.” John would just get agitated, even angry, for some reason mostly with Virginia. Then, he would inevitably suggest that we stop talking and go skinny-dipping. Virginia did not graduate — I know she wanted to write literary history, but sorry to say, I don't know what happened to her.

As for me, I returned home to my native Wisconsin, and divide my time between protecting my children from the neighbors and writing novels and how-to books. My most popular how-to book is one that may actually be of interest to you now or in a few years. It is a guide for young professors, entitled, *A Progressive(ly Deteriorating) Guide for the Young Professor*. None of my novels have been very successful, even though *Young Cannibals* now enjoys something of a cult following. (The book may actually be made into a movie — I am currently negotiating with Howard Stern.)

In the end, I learned the most important lessons of my life from my friends at graduate school — Virginia, Mick, and John. But I would trade my schooling in the College of Education for nothing, especially as a novelist. I have come to think of my experiences at Michigan State as analogous to going to Catholic School. The endless courses and graduate assistantships hurt you, take away your dignity and self-confidence, but in the end, you are wounded in ways that allow you to limp

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along — be it as a writer, a teacher, a parent — in thoroughly comic and tragic ways. Or, at least, that's the best that can happen to you, when you have friends like I had. You can also succeed.



A lie, the above, of course — a story that was published in a short-lived underground newspaper at Michigan State, soon after I had finished my degree and begun work as an assistant professor at Washington University in St. Louis. A lie with truths, nonetheless: that friends, mostly international students (Jeremy from South Africa, Antonio from Portugal, Maria and Roberto from Brazil, Mohammad from Egypt), were the agency, the cause, of my most profound learning about the world and my self during graduate school; that spiritual nourishment came from philosophers and artists; that ways of being with others that I learned in a small farming community in rural Wisconsin, even with their limits and violences, were preferable to how people treated each other in the academy; and that success meant many things in our society and school system, most of which I didn't want.



I just about quit graduate school because of a binary opposition. It seems strange, now, that I would trap myself in an either/or (I've been working both/and philosophies and philosophers for a long time), but I did. I looked at the professors, the role-models, around me, and I felt trapped by the choice of this or that: success or failure, where success was becoming a mainstream researcher/policy analyst-to-the-highest-bidder, a hired gun who followed the money, researching whatever would be funded, writing and talking about whatever would grant prestige. Failure was quitting. Maybe there was another either/or punishing me, active or passive, where the hired guns were active and the passive had given up or were cynical or paralyzed by doubt. I wanted to be active, but I didn't want to succeed.

I was tired. I wanted to fail or to at least come up against some sort of limit so I wouldn't have to keep trying so hard. I fantasized about being called into my first advisor's office and being told that I was a good person, that I had worked hard, but that I was just not cut out for university life, that I should go back home and teach children well, confident that I had given it my best and had found my place. This never happened.

When I was in high school, two English teachers coached the High Quiz Bowl team, which regularly won the televised competitions against other local schools. Even then I felt that there was something strange about judging intelligence in the recall of academic trivia, but I tried out for the team once, and didn't make it. The people on the team were thought of as smart, in a quirky genius kind of way. I got As in my classes (one B+ in typing), but I wanted to be smart like them.

My friend Paul was on the High Quiz Bowl team, and one of the coaches, Mrs. Tavery, once told Paul that she thought that I was a nice boy and that I worked hard.

I had taken a class with her, so I knew what she would have sounded like when she said this, what her face would have looked like. She was an upper middle-class woman with a wealthy husband from a larger nearby city, patting me on the head. I knew I was nice. I knew I worked hard. I wanted to be smart. The insult sticks. The anger had gotten me through tough times in graduate school before, but wasn't enough now.

My parent's house, the house I grew up in, sits a little off Highway 107, which you take south to Highway 153, then east (through Mosinee, past the paper mill) over to Highway 51, and then south to Madison, then down and around Chicago and over to Michigan. I remember walking the driveway with my mom, back and forth between 107 and the house, trying to tell her about graduate school and success and failure. Going to school was familiar, but somehow my courses didn't seem the center of what I was doing. And all the university politics, the gossip, all the energy we spent figuring out who were trustworthy professors, all the passionate debate about the relative worth of qualitative and quantitative research — all this was odd, seemed unworthy, even unseemly to talk about with my mom.

Jane hadn't been keen about me going to graduate school in the first place, about us moving away from the small town we grew up in, from both of our families. For months we talked about whether we should go, though we had no real sense of what we were considering, no family or friends to tell us what it would be like. In the end, I told her that I was worried that I would wake up when I was forty and regret not trying; that I worried that I might not be a big enough person not to blame her; that not going might ruin our marriage.

I was going down. I didn't know how to go forward without choosing success and I didn't want to fail. I kept telling everyone that things were going great — and on the outside, by official marks, by what people saw and thought of me, things were.



Eventually I would be saved, many times, by my friend, Jeremy Price, and by my dissertation advisor, David Cohen. Jeremy saved simply by affirming me as a human being and by believing that I could do some good — he could do this for me because I respected (was in awe, actually, of) his courage and activism, the way he had moved and was moving in the world. Jeremy cared for me, typed for me, that awful last month when I had to finish my dissertation or renegotiate an already-not-so-great beginning assistant professor salary. David saved by being powerful and successful in academia without seeming to be captured by it.

But I was first saved by a book — a little feminist book, *Writing a Woman's Life*, by Carolyn G. Heilbrun. The book wasn't assigned for any class. I don't remember how I came to be reading it at that particular time. But it saved me.

I am still working out what it means to say that we, as humans, are 'storied' beings, but I believe it. I was foundering because I didn't want to choose and live a success story that left me without a soul and that betrayed my origins, and I didn't

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want to be a failure story that rendered me inert, that allowed Mrs. Tavery and her privileged counterparts to pat me on the head and compliment me on how hard I worked. What Heilbrun did was give me another story, another plot, that I could attempt to live.

Heilbrun (1988) argues that women's biographies and autobiographies have long denied women's anger and desires for power and control over their own lives. The quests that women such as Jane Addams and Ida Tarbell pursued determinedly are rendered, in print, as good fortune or happenstance: "Each woman set out to find her life's work, but the only script insisted that work discover and pursue her, like the conventional romantic lover" (p. 25). Part of the struggle for women writing their lives, then, has been the struggle to resist and transform an inherited script that suppresses aspects of women's passion and agency.

I began thinking of my graduate studies as a quest, and I began paying attention to the inherited scripts that I might be trapping myself in. My quest remained undefined — and looking back from a decade and a half of living, it's hard to figure out why this idea had such a powerful saving effect on me. I loved Don Quixote, loved Sancho Panza too, and was probably trying be both at the same time — dreamy- and clear-eyed, serious and laughing, high and low, a mind and a body. However Heilbrun's writing on quests and inherited scripts helped, it did.



I fell into the street while walking home from my first meeting as a brand new assistant professor.

The meeting hadn't gone well. I had agreed to show up for work a month early (without pay — I didn't know that I could say no or ask for money). It was a meeting of the elementary teacher education faculty at Washington University in St. Louis (they called it Wash U) — in our small department of education, that was four people.

Within fifteen minutes, two of the four were shouting at each other, standing up and shouting at each other across a small table. I had finished and defended my dissertation a week before, had moved myself and my family from Michigan to Missouri, had unloaded a truck into a new apartment the day and night before, had not finished unpacking, and had not slept in about a month. People were shouting at one another.

Two hours later, I was on the sidewalk. I thought the three miles walk home might clear my head. I felt cursed.

St. Louis is hot and humid in August. Within a few blocks, I had sweated through my shirt and pants. I started seeing spots (I think they were blue). I discovered that my walking wasn't always in a straight line. Eventually, I stumbled off the sidewalk and into Delmar Avenue, where I was struck and killed by one of the speeding cars.



In my third year at Wash U, my colleague and friend, Lauren, brought a gender

discrimination suit against the university. Two young, chipper lawyers representing Wash U came to see me. They smiled and smiled and asked if I had any questions about my upcoming deposition. Since I was going to testify for Lauren and against the university (and against senior members of my own department), I was a little worried about what this all meant for my future at Wash U and for my chances for getting tenure in a few years.

"I'm a little worried about what this all means for my future at Wash U and for my chances for getting tenure in a few years," I said.

Puzzled looks on their two earnest faces.

"I'll be testifying for Lauren and against the university and senior members of my own department," I said.

Puzzled looks, then gradual understanding, then determined smiles, then she said, "I can assure you, Professor Lensmire, that Washington University does not engage in recrimination."

"Yes, yes," he said.

I think that I might be a writer because, with time, work, and revision, I can at least get close to finding words to express what I want expressed. I am seldom able to do this on the spot, with my mouth. But that day I did.

"I know that they don't engage in recrimination as *official policy*," I said, and laughed.

From the looks on their faces, I'd hurt their feelings.



I decided that I would participate in the graduation ceremonies at Michigan State. I might not have been able to explain graduate school to my family or myself, but everyone understood graduation. I invited my parents, my sisters and brother and their families, to join me. They did. David and his wife, Maggie, invited everyone to their house afterwards.

I was tense most of the day, had been watching for how this fine community of scholars I was joining, with its sense of superiority and self-satisfaction, would express itself and embarrass me in front of my family. I started to relax at David and Maggie's house — they are gracious people, and I watched with gratitude as my mom and dad and brother and sisters stood around them in their kitchen, laughing, sharing stories, drinking wine. My dad thanked David for taking care of me.

I was almost relaxed when my daughter, Sarah, tottering around on one-year-old legs, fell into and broke a glass picture frame that had been set on the floor and was leaning against the piano. Sarah started bleeding from perfectly straight cuts on her left cheek and upper lip. The emergency room doctor decided to use butterfly bandages instead of stitches.



My journey was done, and behind me lay hill and dale, and Life and Death. How shall

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a man measure Progress there where the dark-faced Josie lies? How many heartfuls of sorrow shall balance a bushel of wheat? How hard a thing is life to the lowly, and yet how human and real! And all this life and love and strife and failure, — is it the twilight of nightfall or the flush of some faint-dawning day?

Thus sadly musing, I rode to Nashville in the Jim Crow car. (Du Bois, 1997/1903, p. 81)

W.E.B. Du Bois's musings on the meaning of progress provide a bracing corrective and conclusion to my narrative. I am white, male, enjoy privileges in our society because of this, because of too many years of schooling. I was born to humble circumstances, but they were, in large part, good, healthy ones. Du Bois reminds me that we all suffer, but that does not mean that we all are oppressed.

I have never felt that the university was made for me or people like me. In saying this, I claim an identity as a rural person, a small town person (though I've not lived in one for a long time) — someone whose father was a cheese maker who worked ten to twelve hours a day in a factory owned by a small dairy cooperative, someone who grew up among farmers and other hard-working people, where hard work meant using your hands and your back and your legs, as well as your head.

Being white and male meant that others imagined at least some social mobility for me, if I worked hard and showed some intelligence. I could work to hide my working-class insides, I could pass for middle-class, if I wanted. But I never wanted to (and still don't, even as I live, now, a middle-class life).

I continue to struggle to define my quest, to avoid both success and failure. I am divorced — graduate school neither saved nor ruined my first marriage — and I am remarried, to Ruth. I got tenure at Wash U and then left for Minnesota — insults and injuries and absurdities sometimes stick to your skin and your office walls, and you need to move to breathe, to live.

My daughter Sarah is 13 years old. She is strong and true and beautiful. I try to help her move with more fluidity and insight and power than I could, across country and city spaces, across rooms filled with folk and pointy-headed intellectuals. And she does.

You have to be very close to Sarah to see the scars on her cheek and lip.

References

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